



Mothering Justice: Working with Mothers in Criminal and Social Justice Settings. Edited by Lucy Baldwin

Waterside Press. £25. 320 pages.

In *Mothering Justice* the mantra of child centredness is held up for closer inspection. Of course the well qualified academics and practitioners who author this book believe that a child's welfare is of the utmost importance. Where they differ, is in their belief that doing the best for the child always involves supporting the mother-child relationship as fully as it can be, wherever possible. The authors' biographies, which reveal varied, impressive achievements and skills, include their credentials as mothers. Lucy Baldwin, the editor, describes her experiences as a teenage single parent, recounting the support she received from two significant professionals, her midwife and health visitor; without them she feels her life may have been quite different. Sinead O'Malley's background is described as social worker, teacher, survivor and mother of a six-year-old boy.

Strength of feeling around the importance of motherhood permeates the text whilst also emphasising that some mothers are more acceptable within society than others. For example chapter ten gives an account of a wealthy middle class business woman whose four year old daughter swallows her mother's cocaine, believing it to be sherbet. There is an investigation but few ongoing concerns remain and the case is rapidly closed. This compares sharply to the other case studies of women in the book with backgrounds of poverty, exclusion, neglect and abuse, which will be instantly recognisable to those working in probation fields.

An early chapter on social workers' interventions is aptly titled '*Damned if you do, damned if you don't*'. Once women are drawn into the social services orbit they can become powerless and unheard; this provokes fury but the women are in a double bind. If they want to keep their children they need to prove themselves so are understandably and rightfully wary of expressing negative emotions to practitioners. When children are removed a gaping hole is left with all the associated emotions of grief and guilt alongside the withdrawal of professional support. Women who have been failed by the system as children (many have been 'looked after' children) are failed again because often social workers have too little time to gain the trust needed to listen and try to understand the woman's situation. The next chapter '*Policing Mothers*', continues the theme of women's stories not being listened to and of inadequate resources. We hear of domestic violence trivialised; of women arrested for retaliation following longstanding domestic victimisation; of police having to deal with severe mental health issues; and 'places of safety' which equate to police cells.

Stereotyping of women in the criminal justice system is spotlighted in '*Mothers in the Dock*' chapter where (un)conscious and (in)visible sexism is still rife. Women are criminalised and seen as bad parents for engaging in prostitution. Magistrates sentence mothers to prison for relatively minor offences despite the expense of custody plus the social, emotional and financial costs of mother/child separation, particularly when children are then placed into care. In the highly charged environment of prison, women may attempt to 'mother' at a distance or discharge their role after their mental health deteriorates or attempts are made to self-medicate through increasing use of drugs. Innovative, creative schemes to offer assistance are scant, leaving women with feelings of "loss, shame, bewilderment and devastation" (p.165).

Pamela Stewart in chapter seven outlines how ironically custodial therapeutic approaches may offer sanctuary to some women, sometimes for the first time in their lives. Another tragic irony in chapter ten is that prison becomes a way for addicted women to access resources unavailable or unused in the community – ante and post natal, mental health and drug/alcohol services. Expansion of community provision is called for but no easy answers exist even where services are available. Group therapy may appear highly threatening to women whose core experience of groups stems from dysfunctional, violent families. Hopelessness is conveyed through accounts of when women's children are removed at birth, the immediate result is often another pregnancy, reliving the cycle of trauma and loss.

Space for reflection on ethical dilemmas and diversity issues appears through '*Pauses for Thought*' insert boxes. Scattered throughout the book these devices, linked to detailed scenarios, are particularly hard-hitting. Yasmine's birth plan in chapter eight is an example where we are asked to consider how it might be to prepare for labour, removed from family and friends, not knowing whether you have a place on a prison mother and baby unit and if you will be allowed to keep your child. Even more, what happens in this scenario when the person concerned does not speak English.

The book is somewhat let down by a degree of repetition and aspects of the structure, whereby the reader is asked to think about cases in forthcoming chapters but notwithstanding this, *Mothering Justice* is a valuable addition for those working with women in criminal justice, and other statutory/voluntary agencies. Readers are expected to consider their own, their organisation's and society's prejudices and the necessity of committing to constructive long-term community projects, for the sakes of these women and their children. A focus on vulnerable mothers and the intricate connections with their children, whether together or apart, is long overdue.

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